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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT MOVES TO QUELL LABOR UNREST

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1.(SBU) Summary: President Yayi and his ministers moved, on January 29, 2008, to quell mounting labor unrest by meeting many of the demands made by striking workers. The GOB's moves were not met with immediate support by Beninese unions. The teachers' unions, which had previously launched a strike on January 7, and the medical workers' union, which went on strike on January 22, decided to continue their labor actions. Benin's other unions have threatened to call a general strike to express their displeasure with the GOB's handling of their demands. Some observers have raised the possibility that the unions are working with political parties opposed to President Yayi to foment political discontent. End Summary.

Teachers and Medical Workers Strike

2.(U) The teachers' unions went on strike beginning on January 7 after they complained that the GOB did not fill the commitments it made, at the beginning of the academic year, to improve conditions and pay. Those commitments averted a strike in October 2007 (Reftel). During the strike teachers work on Mondays and Fridays but do not come to work Tuesday through Thursday. Sources indicate varying degrees of adhesion to the teachers' strike. In the departments of Littoral and Atlantique in southern Benin, 70-80 percent of teachers are not teaching whereas in the Department of Oueme, the stronghold of Party for Democratic Renewal (PRD) leader Adrien Houngbedji, who is known to oppose President Yayi, close to 100 percent of teachers are not showing up for work.

3.(U) Medical workers started a similar, 3 day a week strike, on January 22. The medical workers have demanded higher salaries, payment of bonuses, and more money to pay for hospital equipment and maintenance. According to union leaders, their frustration stems mainly from a perceived lack of GOB resources devoted to improving the health system.

Unions Agitate

4.(SBU) On January 22, the five largest and most important workers' unions gathered in a public meeting to air their grievance with President Yayi's government, which according to them, is not willing to improve their working conditions and is preventing them from exercising their rights as unions. They accused the GOB of paying the press to silence journalists, because, in their opinion, all the major newspapers and radios of the country have sided with the government and have been disseminating false information that is favorable to the government. Additionally, the unions complained that the GOB was organizing alternate unions, often dubbed "patriotic movements" to break up striking unions. Note: Such a

movement was organized during the customs officers' strike in early January. End Note. At the end of the meeting the unions stated they would launch a nationwide strike, on an undetermined date, to paralyze the administration and compel the government to satisfy their demands.

15. (SBU) According to a high-level source in a union friendly to the government, the January 22 meeting was not widely attended and several high-ranking customs officers attended the meeting. The same source said it was clear that unions were working with the Renaissance du Benin (RB) political party and PRD to stoke popular discontent with the government. Both of these parties are facing increasing competition from President Yayi's coalition, the Cowrie Force for an Emerging Benin (FCBE), in the upcoming municipal elections.

GOB Responds

6.(U) On January 29, at an unscheduled meeting of the Council of Ministers (USG cabinet equivalent), the GOB announced that it would satisfy some of the major claims put forward by teachers and health sector workers. The decisions that it took include an increase in the teachers' incentive allowance to up to 25 percent of a teacher's salary and the payment of salary arrears for teachers and health sector workers. The GOB also stated it would provide funding to cover medical equipment related expenses for hospitals. Additionally, the GOB stated it would consider ways of putting in place a transport allowances scheme for all civil servants. The Council of Ministers announced that the implementation of all these measures would start by the second half of 2008 and that the measures will be financed by a supplementary 2008 budget request to the National Assembly.

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7.(U) Following the decisions of the Council of Ministers, union leaders met on January 30 and decided to continue with their fight because they are not satisfied with the solutions proposed by the government. They went further complaining that they had not been involved in the GOB's decision-making process. They also blamed the government for using delaying tactics. A well informed unionist confirmed to Post that the general strike is still on their agenda.

8(SBU) Comment: There is no doubt that President Yayi is seriously concerned with the prospect of a general strike that could adversely impact Benin's economy and his political standing in the run up to President Bush's visit to Benin. The increasingly bitter political battle surrounding the organization of the municipal elections appears to be bleeding over into political party involvement in unions' actions. The workers' unions seem, at present, ready to continue their fight in spite of the GOB's promises, and the situation is shaping up as a trial of strength between the GOB and the workers' unions. President Yayi's skills as a negotiator will be tested as he continues to attempt to bring these strikes to an end. End Comment.

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